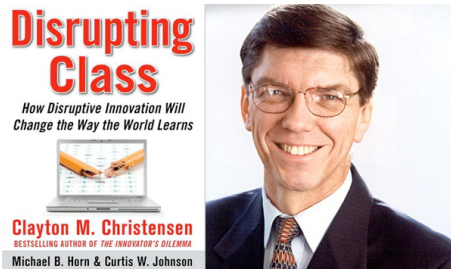


Christensen, C.M., Horn, M.B., & Johnson, C.W. (2008). *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. Chicago: McGraw-Hill Professional Publishers.



Clayton Christensen, a Harvard business professor & author of several well-received books on innovations in business, has written an intriguing book that examines the problems of public schools and then applies his business-related theories to solving those problems. Although not specifically trained in education, the author quickly establishes his ability to examine the problems related to raising student performance in public schools. His expertise is founded in two key areas that are

relevant to educational innovation: first, he quickly shows that current business practice can be effective in analyzing institutional problems from the outside rather than the inside, and second, the concept that analyzing institutional inertia is the same in any bureaucratic institution, whether it is based on a business or an educational model. Using a variety of real life examples from both the business world and education, Professor Clayton clearly shows that effective change cannot occur from within any given institution. The basic goals of any institution always include gradual improvement in their product and self-preservation. It is the understandable goal of self-preservation, the author argues, that prevents an institution from making any meaningful change from within their own structure. Professor Clayton proposes the use of his theory of innovation called “destructive innovation”, in which meaningful change can only come from outside the existing organization. Interestingly, he discusses the fact that no modern company would attempt to make meaningful changes within the company while trying to maintain product production. Yet this is exactly what today’s educational institutions are trying to do. Schools are required to continue the education of their students while attempting to make changes to meet ever-changing national & state standards, new demands from the public, shifts in teaching theory, and accommodate the demands of new generations of students and parents. The author praises public schools for their success in accomplishing this task when most businesses would not even attempt the changes in the first place. Despite these incremental successes, Professor Christensen argues that schools will never be able to make the meaningful institutional changes necessary to meet the future demands of students who are fundamentally different than those students who preceded them. In the end, the author reaches the conclusion that the only way for public schools to make the disruptive changes necessary to meet their future goals is to set up schools outside of the current public educational system. He believes that the process will begin with loss of programs in public schools due to declining tax revenue and reduced state budget support for public education. As schools cut programs, other sources will develop to meet the unsatisfied demand for these lost educational opportunities. Professor Christensen believes that computer technology will quickly develop that will fill the gap created by these lost courses. He shows that courses such as Advanced Placement, Dual Credit, foreign language, and computer technology courses can be effectively offered through online sources. The author also believes that new schools will spring up to offer courses and innovative teaching methods that will be unavailable in public school. Professor Christensen envisions two sources of these new, more innovative schools. First, through the use of charter schools who are free of traditional educational restrictions, and second, the establishment of model schools within existing educational systems that can use and showcase new methods of teaching and administration. The author makes a convincing argument that until schools are free of the institutional restrictions that hold them back and prevent them from exploring non-

traditional educational solutions, they will never be able to make the innovative changes necessary to meet future demands.

As I read Professor Christensen's book, I found myself nodding and smiling to myself. "Finally," I thought, "Someone who understands the basic problems involved in making meaningful changes in education." The problems that he identifies are right on the mark. He has identified and quantified every single obstacle involved in changing public education. His discussion of disruptive innovation, along with the concrete business examples he provides, is clear and easy to understand. Deep inside every public school educator is the awareness that fundamental changes are necessary and that all of the current changes in education are nothing more than a Band-Aid on the problem. The information in this book cannot fail to strike a chord in the mind and heart of every educator. My one disappointment with Dr. Christensen's conclusions is the fact that his primary recommendation is to turn to charter schools as an answer for the educational ills of America. Although charter schools would seem to be an irrefutable conclusion to the facts discussed in this book, I have several problems with this conclusion. First, education is an institution that has resisted change for the last 200 years. We still run on a annual calendar that is more effective for farmers than it is for today's modern world. What makes the author think that schools would willingly abrogate their power and student base to charter schools in the name of educational innovation? Second, the track record of charter schools in Texas has been less than exemplary. The TAKS failure rate in most charter schools is at least as high as it is in public schools. This highlights the fact that, without meaningful changes in the public laws that administer the educational system in the United States, there cannot be meaningful changes in either public or publicly chartered schools. As long as the stakes remain high for educational institutions should they fail to meet the demands of lawmakers, then there will always a reluctance to do anything other than make minor changes in how we teach. Charter schools, if they attempt to meet the same requirements as their public counterparts, will have no choice other than to use teaching methods similar to those used in public schools. Without a concrete plan to effectively make the demands of lawmakers more flexible, then Professor Christensen's recommendations fall short of the mark. I would have much rather he dealt with the realities of public education by making concrete suggestions that lie within the current educational & governmental environment, such as the model school concept he discusses as his second choice for the innovative disruption concept. What the author needs to overcome is the fact that model school concepts circulate around public education like bags of M and M candy. There is a new model every day. What education needs is an *effective* model for our schools, and a method to convince lawmakers to allow us to make these changes long-term without fear of legislative sanction. I think most educators know, deep down inside, what changes need to be made in our schools. We also know the obstacles that we face in meeting those goals. While this book does a good job reinforcing this knowledge, it does little to provide an effective solution.